

# ***Factors to consider when choosing a hearing aid...***

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*There are hundreds of highly sophisticated hearing aids available today, and there are many factors you need to consider when choosing the right hearing aid for your needs.*

*Many people want “the best” hearing aid, or the “the same fabulous new hearing aid that my neighbour has”. However, there is no one “best” hearing aid, and what works well for someone else may not be suitable for your hearing.*

Before getting too far into hearing aid technology, let's consider another, more familiar scenario first. Imagine you are buying a car. What's the “best” car for you?

That depends on many factors - do you want/need:

- a manual or automatic?
- hatchback or sedan?
- 4WD drive for heading off-road, or something smooth on city roads?
- Something small and economical, or fast and sporty?
- BMW, Ferrari, Ford, Holden, Kia or..?
- Metallic blue, fire-engine red, or canary yellow?
- Private purchase or company purchase?
- Mag wheels, leather seats, sunroof...?



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Many questions to be considered and the answers will differ greatly from person to person. There are just as many questions to ask, and things to consider, when choosing a hearing aid; however, the discussion is a little more complicated as hearing aid technology is not likely to be as familiar to you.

This guide discusses some of the options available in hearing aids. The aim is to help you, **in consultation with your audiologist**, decide what features may be beneficial to you. The information is broken into several sections:

- Styles of hearing aids
- Hearing aid controls
- Technology options
- Hearing aid accessories
- What do the hearing aids need to do?
- What to expect
- Price guide and considerations

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## **APPLIED AUDIOLOGY SERVICES**

Applied Audiology Pty Ltd ABN 62 003 633 298

Wisteria Cottage, 303 George St (PO BOX 765) WINDSOR NSW 2756

Telephone: **02 4577 3358** Fax: 02 4587 8228 Web: [www.appliedaudiology.net](http://www.appliedaudiology.net)

## ***What style of hearing aid do you need?***

Hearing aids come in a variety of styles. Not all styles are suitable for everyone. Personal preference, technological requirements, degree of hearing loss, size and shape of the ear canal, and ear condition all influence the choice of hearing aid style.

- **CIC (completely in the canal)** aids are the smallest and most discreet hearing aids. They have few (if any) controls available on them and often lack some of the technological features of the slightly larger aids. They are suitable for mild to moderate hearing losses. Small size can make them fiddly to use. They are not suitable for very small ears, or if you experience discharge from your ears.
- **ITC (in-the-canal)** hearing aids sit within the ear canal and part of the outer ear. They have room for more features than CIC's, for example on-board controls. They are suitable for mild to moderate hearing losses, although people with good low pitch hearing may feel "blocked up" when wearing them. They are not suitable if you experience discharge from your ears. They are generally the easiest to insert and remove from your ears, but battery management may be fiddlier than BTE aids.
- **ITE (in-the-ear)** hearing aids fit in the outer part of the ear. They are generally more powerful than CIC or ITC hearing aids, suitable for mild to moderately severe hearing losses. People with good low pitch hearing may feel "blocked up" when wearing them. They are not suitable if you experience discharge from your ears.



- **BTE (behind-the-ear)** hearing aids fit behind the ear, with a small ear piece delivering sound into the ear. There are several sizes and styles of BTE aids.
  - **Small "thin-tube" BTE's** are quite small, and have a thin tube leading into the ear. All of the electronics are contained behind your ear. They can be fitted with a "one size fits all" silicone ear tip, or with a small custom-made ear piece. They suit a wide range of hearing losses, and can include various on-board controls if required. They are particularly good if you have good low pitch hearing as their open earpieces allow a natural flow of sound in and out of the ear.
  - **Receiver-in-canal (RIC)** aids are a mini version of the thin-tube BTE's, and the most discreet option. The receiver (or earphone) is placed inside the ear canal instead of behind the ear. It is connected to the body of the hearing aid by a very thin (almost invisible) wire. This type of fitting can be more powerful than the thin-tube BTE's. Typically there are three power levels available, so it may be possible to change to a stronger receiver if your hearing deteriorates in the future. They are not suitable if you have very small ear canals, or if you experience discharge from your ears.



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- **Power BTE's** are the largest of the BTE aids. They can be fitted to all types of hearing loss, but are most commonly used if you have a severe or profound hearing loss. Larger batteries deliver more power than the aids with smaller batteries.

- **Assistive listening devices** may be a suitable alternative to hearing aids if you have a specific hearing need, or if you are likely to have difficulty managing a conventional hearing aid. These usually consist of an amplifier and light-weight headphones. Their large size makes them very easy to manage. Some are specifically designed for TV use - if your only difficulty is hearing the television at a level that doesn't bother the family, you may find these a better option than hearing aids.



### ***Do you need a waterproof or dustproof hearing aid?***

Water is the enemy of most hearing aids. Whilst many hearing aids are “splash-proof”, there is only one range of water-proof hearing aids - the Siemens Aquaris range of behind-the-ear hearing aids. These can be an

advantage if you enjoy swimming, water sports, fishing or other activities where the hearing aids could get wet. They are also an advantage if you perspire a lot – maybe you play sport, or spend time in the garden or a workshop where your ears get hot and sweaty.

The water proof seals on the hearing aids also make them dustproof which is important if you want to wear them in a workshop or other particularly dusty environment.



### ***What controls do you need on your hearing aids?***

#### ***Do you want lots of control and adjustment over your hearing aids, or do you want them to be simple “set and forget” devices?***

Some hearing aids are very simple, only needing to be switched on and off (for example, the Oticon Intiga aids which are targeted at first time users). Others allow you to change volume, and/or sound programs. Some even learn your preferred settings over time, for example Unitron Quantam Pro devices have a “Learn Now” button that you can use once you have tuned your hearing aids for a particular situation.

#### ***Do you need a volume control?***

Hearing aids are set to provide different amounts of volume for different levels of sound. For example, soft sounds are generally given more amplification than loud sounds. This is often referred to as an “automatic volume control”. Your audiologist should be able to set the hearing aids so that they are a comfortable volume for you most of the time. However, there may be times when you prefer a different volume – for example, if your partner tends to have the TV set at a very soft volume, you may wish to turn your hearing aids up; or if you are in an unusually noisy place, you may want to turn the hearing aids down. Other people prefer to leave their hearing aids at a constant volume.

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### What are the volume control options?

- Some hearing aids have no volume control – often for simplicity and smaller size.
- Some have a volume lever or wheel on them for altering the volume. The volume range can vary from a small amount of adjustment to a large amount of adjustment. Volume controls can usually be deactivated or locked if they are not required.
- Some hearing aids come as a pair, where one hearing aid has a volume control and the other has a program button. Adjusting the volume on one hearing aid will automatically adjust the volume of the other hearing aid.
- Some hearing aids have a remote control that can be used to adjust the volume. This may be easier than trying to adjust the aid itself because you can easily see and feel what you are doing.
- Some hearing aids “learn” your volume preferences. The hearing aids will adjust their “switch on” volume over time, in response to how you set the volume in different situations.

### Do you need a telecoil?

A telecoil can be useful for hearing in public places that are equipped with audio/induction loops. Telecoils pick up electromagnetic signals and convert them into sound in the hearing aid. The telecoil program in the hearing aid can be set to telecoil only, or a combination of hearing aid microphone and telecoil. Many theatres, churches and auditoriums are equipped with audio/induction loops that transmit sound directly to hearing aids. The hearing aids need to contain a telecoil in order to receive these signals.



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What's the advantage? Imagine you are in a large auditorium, listening to a speaker. There may be competing noises e.g. some traffic noise from outside, a baby crying in the background, someone chatting nearby, chip packets crackling etc. The microphones on your hearing aid may pick up these extraneous sounds, as well as the sound you want to hear, making it difficult to concentrate on the speaker. The hearing loop transmits only the sound coming through the public address system. Setting your hearing aid onto the telecoil setting would allow you to hear the speaker, whilst reducing the amplification of other sounds around you.

Some phones also have an induction loop in them (less common on mobile phones). If you set your hearing aid onto the telecoil program it will pick up the sound coming from the induction loop in the phone, without amplifying as much of the surrounding sound. Because the hearing aid microphones are muted on the telecoil setting it can also help avoid annoying whistling when the phone is held close to the aid.

Some hearing aids have an “automatic” telephone setting. When the hearing aid registers a strong magnetic field, such as that coming from a telephone handset, it will be triggered to change into the telephone program. As soon as the phone is moved away from the ear, the hearing aid resets itself to its normal listening setting.

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### ***Do you need a remote control for your hearing aids?***



Some hearing aids are available with remote controls. These can be a good option if you have trouble manipulating the small controls on your hearing aids, and can also give you access to a much greater range of adjustment.

Remote controls be held in your hand and allow you to change the volume and/or programs on your hearing aids. Some of the more sophisticated hearing aids allow you to “train” your hearing aids so that they learn your preferred settings in different environments, based on adjustments that you make with the remote control.

### ***Do you need rechargeable batteries?***

Hearing aid batteries need to be changed regularly, with most batteries only lasting for 100-200 hours of use. If you have trouble changing batteries, rechargeable batteries may be a good option. You can simply place your hearing aids in a special charger each night and let them re-charge overnight. This is no better or worse for the environment than using standard batteries; the value lies in added convenience for you.

### ***What technology do you need in your hearing aids?***

#### ***Do you need more than one sound program in your hearing aids?***

Hearing aids can be set with one or more sound programs. These can be accessed by a push button on the hearing aid or via a remote control. Different sound programs can be used in different situations, and may involve different microphone settings, bass or treble settings, volume levels and/or other features enabled on the hearing aid.

Common programs include:

- **“Automatic”**: The hearing aids automatically adjust their settings depending on the environment you are in (quiet or noisy). This can range from switching between two settings in basic aids, to quite sophisticated adjustments of volume, pitch, microphone mode, compression etc. in premium hearing aids.
- **“Quiet”**: A good setting for quiet environments e.g. when in conversation with your family at home.
- **“Noise”**: This usually involves a change in the direction from which sound is amplified. There may be some additional filtering of sound to make it more comfortable and pleasant in noisy places.
- **“Music”**: Hearing aid programs are typically designed to give priority to speech sounds. However, the setting that gives the best speech understanding may not be the best setting for listening to music, as music has very different characteristics to speech. A music program filters sound in a different way to enhance your enjoyment of music.

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- **“Telephone”**: The telephone program may be as simple as a reduction in high pitch sounds to avoid annoying whistling from the hearing aid. It could also involve activating the telecoil or Bluetooth settings in the hearing aids, depending on how sophisticated the aids are, and what type of phone you are using. Some hearing aids can automatically change to a telephone setting when a phone is held close to them.

### ***What type of microphone modes do you need in your hearing aids?***

Varying types of microphones are available in hearing aids, and different settings can be useful in different situations. Some hearing aids automatically switch between different microphone modes, whilst others need to be changed manually.

- **“Omnidirectional”**: the microphones on the hearing aids are sensitive to sounds in all directions. This is a good option in quiet environments, and for people who need to be conscious of sounds coming from different directions around them.
- **“Fixed Directional”**: the microphones are more sensitive to sounds from in front, and less sensitive to sounds from behind. This is usually a good setting for noisy situations, especially if you are able to face the person you want to hear, and have your back to noise sources. This setting does not eliminate sounds from beside or behind you, but it does reduce them, making it more pleasant to listen in noisy situations.
- **“Adaptive directional”**: this involves the microphones reducing their sensitivity to dominant moving noise sources around you, whilst focussing on speech sounds in front of you. A good example of how this works is when a truck is passing by you on the street. As the truck approaches on your left the hearing aid microphone will pick up less noise from your left side. As the truck passes to your right side, the hearing aid microphone will amplify less of the sound from your right side.
- **“Multichannel adaptive”**: the hearing aids analyse the sounds in the environment, and can reduce the sound of multiple moving noise sources of different frequencies. This leads to greater comfort, and potentially better speech understanding in noisy places.
- **“Focussed amplification”**: (eg Phonak “ZoomControl” or Siemens “SpeechFocus”): the microphones can be set to enhance sound coming from a particular direction. For example, you may wish to hear a passenger in the back seat of the car. Hearing aids typically classify the car as a “noisy place” because of the road and engine noise, and will reduce the sounds coming from behind, making it difficult to hear the passenger in the back seat. Focussed amplification can help to amplify the dominant speech sound, regardless of the direction it is coming from. This can be accessed manually on the hearing aid, or can be part of the automatic program changing in the hearing aid.

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***Do you need Bluetooth compatibility (or similar) in your hearing aids?***



Bluetooth is a wireless transmission system that works over short distances. Many mobile phones, music players, computers etc. are able to transmit sound via Bluetooth. Hearing aids that can receive Bluetooth signals allow you to connect wirelessly to such devices. This can give some huge advantages:

- Hands-free use of your mobile phone – allowing you to hear your mobile phone in one or both hearing aids without having to hold the phone near your ear
- Streaming of music directly into both hearing aids, instead of needing to use earphones
- Streaming of tv directly into your hearing aids, allowing you to listen to the tv without disturbing others.

To make use of Bluetooth technology in your hearing aids you will need accessories appropriate to your needs e.g. a phone “streamer” or a tv “streamer”.

***Do you need to connect to other devices around the house such as a baby monitor or doorbell alert?***

Some people with a severe or profound hearing loss have trouble hearing important environmental sounds such as a doorbell, phone ringing or baby crying. Unitron offers a hearing aid and accessory package that connects hearing aids to a household alert system, via the hearing aid remote control.

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***Do you need an external microphone for your hearing aids?***

Hearing aids can't choose which of the many sounds in your environment you wish to listen to. Distance from the speaker can also make it hard to hear.

A separate microphone can be given to the person speaking, or placed near the sound you are listening to, and priority will be given to that sound. For example, in a noisy shopping centre you could give your microphone to your partner to clip onto his or her clothing.

Your partner's voice would then be picked up and sent directly into your hearing aids, making it easier to hear their voice over the other noises in the shopping centre. This is available in some ReSound hearing aids via the “MiniMic”, and is designed to operate over several metres.



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An alternative to this is an FM system which can operate over a greater distance. FM systems consist of two parts – a transmitter and a receiver. The transmitter is given to the person speaking, and their voice is wirelessly transmitted via FM radio signal to the receiver connected to the hearing aids. This may be helpful in a lecture theatre or meeting room where the speaker is at some distance from you. It can also help in background noise – the transmitter only picks up sounds that are close to it – you can point it at the person speaking (or get them to wear it), and their voice will be transmitted directly to your hearing aids.

Phonak makes many of the FM systems used with hearing aids. Phonak hearing aids can have the receiver “built-in” making the system simpler (and smaller) to use.

### ***How many “channels” do you need?***

Hearing aids break sound down into chunks or “channels” and they can be set to provide different amounts of amplification to different channels. Some features in hearing aids, such as noise reduction processes, operate over the entire range of sounds, whilst others operate over individual channels. The more channels a hearing aid has, the more it can be fine-tuned to your particular hearing levels.

### ***What about “fitter controls”?***

Hearing aids have many controls that can be adjusted by your audiologist to suit your particular needs, such as feedback management, wind noise reduction, and transient noise reduction. In standard hearing aids it is possible to switch these controls on and off. In the premium hearing aids it is often possible to set these controls at different levels e.g. mild, moderate, maximum. This allows greater customisation of your hearing aids by your audiologist.

### ***What’s in a name?***

You’ve probably heard the saying “don’t judge a book by its cover”. The same goes for hearing aids – two hearing aids that look identical may have vastly different technology inside them. Manufacturers label their hearing aids in different ways, depending on the technology inside them. Some manufacturers denote the technology level with numbers, others by different product names. For example all the Bernafon Chronos Nano BTE’s look the same, but they come in three different technology levels - Chronos 9, Chronos 7, and Chronos 5. Phonak Ambra, Cassia and Solana BTE’s all look the same, but the names denote different technology levels.

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### ***What level of technology do you need?***

Hearing aids can be broadly classified into three technology levels: standard, advanced and premium. The table below is a simplified guide as to what can be expected with different technology levels – it will differ from product to product, and may also depend on whether you choose an in-the-ear or behind-the-ear version.

|   | Standard                             | Advanced                                    | Premium  |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| No. of channels for fine tuning   | 4-6                                  | 8-12  | 16-20  |
| Bluetooth compatibility e.g. for mobile phone                             | rarely                               | often                                       | usually  |
| Remote control compatibility for extra adjustment                         | rarely                               | usually                                     | usually  |
| Microphone modes for better hearing in background noise                   | Omnidirectional or Fixed directional | Omnidirectional and/or Adaptive directional | Omnidirectional and/or Multichannel adaptive directional and/or Focussed directional |
| Automatic switching of microphone modes/listening settings                | rarely                               | usually                                     | usually  |
| Binaural synchronisation – hearing aids wirelessly synchronising settings | no                                   | often                                       | usually  |
| Noise reduction technology  | basic                                | advanced                                    | sophisticated  |
| Waterproof  | Not available                        | available                                   | available  |

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### ***What do you need to hear?***

Your audiologist will ask you a lot of questions about your lifestyle - the places you go and the things you need to hear – to help work out which hearing aid is right for you.

The table on the next page is a guide as to how different levels of technology relate to common listening goals. No hearing aid will return your hearing to normal; however, when used in conjunction with good communication tactics, they can make a big difference to how well you can hear and communicate.

The ★ rating is an indication of how much improvement the hearing aids are likely to provide in each situation. This does, however, depend on the degree and type of your hearing loss.

|  | Standard | Advanced | Premium |
|--|----------|----------|---------|
| Listening to TV                                  | ★★★★★☆☆  | ★★★★★☆☆  | ★★★★★☆☆ |
| Conversations in small group quiet               | ★★★★★☆☆  | ★★★★★☆☆  | ★★★★★☆☆ |
| Conversations in small group in background noise | ★★★☆☆☆☆  | ★★★★☆☆☆☆ | ★★★★★☆☆ |
| Hearing on mobile phones                         | ★★★☆☆☆☆  | ★★★★☆☆☆☆ | ★★★★★☆☆ |
| Listening to music                               | ★★★★☆☆☆☆ | ★★★★★☆☆  | ★★★★★☆☆ |
| Hearing at a restaurant or club                  | ★★★☆☆☆☆  | ★★★★☆☆☆☆ | ★★★★★☆☆ |
| Hearing conversation in the car                  | ★★★☆☆☆☆  | ★★★★☆☆☆☆ | ★★★★★☆☆ |
| Comfortable listening in noisy places            | ★★★★☆☆☆☆ | ★★★★★☆☆  | ★★★★★☆☆ |

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## ***What does all this cost?***

**Pensioners and Veterans** are able to receive subsidised services through the Office of Hearing Services by obtaining a “Hearing Services Voucher”. This entitles eligible people to hearing assessments, and a choice of “fully subsidised” or “top-up” hearing aids. The “fully subsidised” hearing aids come from the standard range described above. Voucher holders may choose to “top-up” and purchase hearing aids from the advanced or premium ranges, but there is no obligation to do so. You may choose to “top-up” if you want additional accessories for your hearing aids, prefer a smaller size, or feel you would benefit from some of the additional features in advanced or premium aids such as better performance in background noise.

Pensioners and veterans are charged an annual maintenance fee as a contribution towards batteries, repairs and ongoing maintenance of their hearing aids. This is currently \$39.90 per year for pensioners (DVA pays this charge for veterans).

**Adults who are not on a pension** may be eligible for a rebate through their private health fund. The rebates vary greatly from fund to fund and depend on the level of extras cover held. There is also a tax rebate available for net medical expenses over \$2000 during the financial year. We will give you a tax invoice to help with these claims.

**Children and young adults** up to the age of 26 years are eligible for free hearing aid fitting through Australian Hearing (ph 131 797).

The price for the hearing rehabilitation program will depend on the specific type of hearing aids selected, and any accessories chosen to go with them. This will be discussed in detail by your audiologist. The price includes provision of the devices, electronic programming and verification, rehabilitation program, follow-up appointments for the first 12 months, and manufacturer’s warranty.

A rough price guide is as follows:

|   | <b>Hearing rehabilitation program including two <i>standard</i> devices</b>                  | <b>Hearing rehabilitation program including two <i>advanced</i> devices</b> | <b>Hearing rehabilitation program including two <i>premium</i> devices</b> |
|---|--|---|--|
| <b>Pensioners and Veterans with voucher</b> | Mostly fully subsidised. Maybe additional cost if extra accessories or smaller size desired. | Around \$2500 - \$3000  | Around \$5500 - \$7000   |
| <b>Private clients</b>                      | Around \$2500-\$3000 per pair  | Around \$4500-\$5000 per pair   | Around \$7500-\$9000 per pair  |

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### ***What's involved in the rehabilitation process?***

Once appropriate hearing aids have been selected, they need to be individually programmed. We set hearing aids according to a well-researched prescription procedure (NAL NL2) that aims to maximise speech intelligibility whilst maintaining appropriate loudness of sound. However, the sound you hear also depends on the individual characteristics of your ear canal. Two hearing aids set at the same level, but placed in different size ear canals, will give rise to different levels of sound at the ear drum.

We will measure the sound of the hearing aids in your ear canal to check that they are set as well as they can be. However, this is only the start of the process. Your audiologist will then seek feedback from you as to how the hearing aids work in different situations, and will fine tune the aid settings as required.

Your audiologist will show you how to use and maintain your hearing aids, including how to insert them, clean them, change batteries etc.

Hearing aids will not cure your hearing loss, so we will also discuss appropriate expectations about what they can and can't do, based on measurements of your speech discrimination ability. We will help you to find appropriate listening strategies and improve your communication tactics, often with the involvement of your partner or family members.

Your hearing rehabilitation program is more than a one-off purchase of a device. The hearing aids are expected to last at least five years and you are likely to need some adjustments, advice, repairs, and hearing checks during the life of the devices.

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### **What about buying over the internet?**

The Audiological Society of Australia, other medical and professional associations, and most hearing aid manufacturers strongly advise against purchasing hearing aids online without the involvement of an audiologist or audiometrist. This is not about protecting our own interests – it is about ensuring a high standard of care for you.

Selecting and fitting hearing aids is a complex process. Not everyone who has a hearing loss will benefit from a hearing aid. For some people, medical or surgical intervention may be more appropriate. Your audiologist will take into account your particular hearing loss, your hearing needs (including your ability to manage hearing aids), and will design an individual rehabilitation program for you that includes prescribing and fitting the hearing aids. The characteristics of each hearing aid (mould/shell size, material, style, venting, tubing etc) need to be individually selected to maximise sound quality, fit, comfort and safety.

Most hearing aid manufacturers supplying hearing aids in Australia have strict policies against selling hearing aids online, and insist on an audiologist or audiometrist being involved in fitting their products. This is to protect you as there are risks associated with hearing aid fitting. A device that is too loud for a particular hearing loss can cause further permanent damage to your hearing. An earpiece that fits incorrectly can cause pain, discomfort and even pressure sores in or around the ear.

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Be particularly careful of buying hearing aids from overseas. Many of the hearing aids available online are unable to be supported by local audiology clinics as the software and hardware required to adjust the hearing aids is not compatible with Australian standards, and the cost of accessing repairs, software updates, training etc becomes prohibitive.

Whilst online prices can seem attractive, make sure you are comparing prices appropriately. Many hearing aids advertised online give you a price for the device only, and the companies selling them assume that you will be able to appropriately prescribe and set the aids yourself, and they offer little in the way of rehabilitation. You may find you end up with inappropriate devices, and/or needing to pay for additional services from an audiologist or audiometrist to try and improve the fitting outcome.

Please remember that your audiologist has the training and experience to help you make an informed decision about the “best” hearing aid for you, taking into account your hearing needs and your budget.

Applied Audiology is a privately owned, independent clinic. We are not owned by, or aligned with, any particular hearing aid manufacturer. Our audiologists are Paul Dudley, James Leask, Frances Grant and Annette Smith. We regularly receive updates and training from all the major manufacturers, and we will look at a wide range of options when recommending a rehabilitation program. We are accredited by the Office of Hearing Services, WorkCover and Medicare, and each audiologist holds a current *Certificate of Clinical Practice* from Audiology Australia.

Annette Smith BA.DipAud.MAudSA (CCP)

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